

Coca-Cola and Tchaikovsky tell it all in Stolpovskaja's film 'You I love' (2004)
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In light of the currently popular legislation prohibiting the promotion of 'homosexual propaganda' I question the daring quality of Olga Stolpovskaja's film featuring homosexual love, 'You I love' (2004). Drawing upon the analysis of the film by Andrew James Horton, culture editor of *Central Europe Review* and Editor-in-Chief of *Kinoeye*, I claim that, although, the film celebrates a homosexual love story in a new, liberated, and glamorous Moscow, it yet is reminiscent of the Stalinist art and Soviet novel in its plot progression and overall aesthetics. It contains the fundamental features of the master plot of a Socialist realist novel, such as Girardian triangle-the bliss of communal love, chanting of slogans reinforcing the proper order of life, and the series that are fortifying characters of tests and challenges, even symbolic deaths.¹

This melodramatic comedy narrates the life of two seemingly successful Muscovites, Vera and Timofei. Timofei, with a symbolic last name 'Pechorin,' works for an advertising company under an Afro-American gay boss. He makes commercials for Coca-Cola and pizza, coming up with sales-boosting positive slogans and catchy imagery and lines for various ads. He claims that he loves his motherland and that is why he came back to Russia from the U.S., after his parents migrated. Timofei's t-shirt "I love New Orleans Jazz" supports the story. Vera is a popular TV program broadcaster, and her life is surrounded by cliché motivational phrases and images promoting the good life in the

¹ In the *Soviet Novel*, Katerina Clark writes, "All Stalinist novels include some kind of 'death' ... in promulgation towards the paramount re-birth to be worthy of State and mission (Clark 178).

new Russia. She is herself an iconic talking and moving product of the efforts of her TV crew.

They meet during a lunch break at the upscale café, where Timofei pays for Vera's lunch after witnessing the pick pocketing of her wallet. From that moment on the camera follows their "food (not sex) orgies," where they gorge at various Moscow restaurants from Uzbeki to Japanese eateries. The dynamic camera work creates a kaleidoscopic exposure of appetizing food items and the way Timofei and Vera consume them. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that this indulging of food is compensation for the lack of libidinal desire. Timofei's reference in the beginning about his friend, whose virile potency is dependent on the dollar's rate, confirms this impression.

But the food escapade comes to an end when Timofei accidentally runs over a Kalmyk [gastarbeiter], Uloomji, who works at the Zoo. His organic raw presence enchants Timofei, and cuts through the consumerism-driven artificial reality. Regardless, the creators' loving depiction of Uloomji's otherness is rather predictable and ironically matches derogatory collective clichés of the Soviet past about people from the Russian Siberian Plateau. This type of stereotyping of Uloomji as an imperial subject is evident from his poor and tongue-tied command of Russian to his employment at the Zoo.

Furthermore, Uloomji is constantly being shot set vis-a- vis animals: when Uloomji takes his first steps around the city, he is shown speaking to the distributors of advertisement on foot, dressed in animal suits (a crocodile and a tiger), and then at the place of his employment, he befriends a reindeer. In other words, the film creators, in a neo-romantic way, suggest that Uloomji is a part of the animal world. He remains in that state of perception until Timofei hits him with his car and declares: "Я человека сбил!"

“I hit a man (a human being)!” The civilizing process of Uloomji starts immediately; he shaves his armpits, and starts using deodorant.

The ‘forbidden passion’ between the two instead of representing imitation of Gus Van Santesque scenes is more representative of unconditional naïve friendship within the norms of the Soviet Ideology of ‘druzhba narodov’ and male-to-male bonding. As Andrew Horton’s insightful remark states is that both Uloomji’s and Timofei’s sexuality is introverted. Timofei’s body is constantly draped under oversized shirts. His face is almost always shielded by glasses. Uloomji has the looks of a little boy from the popular cartoon “Umka,” in his oversized fur hat and with his broad innocent smile. It seems that the new world order pushes them together, the same way the Stalinist order pushed men together from the battle fields to building the railroads. Although the organicity of the attraction to each other has its childish charm, it yet follows the new capitalist excessive world order and appears to be highly stylized. Other than the last scenes of them kissing, there is only a coded suggestion of the actual gay desire, such as, a jumping statuette of Tchaikovskii on top of the boom box during their tactile game-interaction.

The role of Vera in the film becomes purposefully functional. Vera, upon finding out about her partner’s bisexuality, has a meltdown. She tries to revitalize her self-esteem by patronizing beauty salons and lingerie boutiques. From this, it becomes obvious that the makers of the film are schooled in visual techniques of eliminating the threat of castration by disintegrating the female with the help of camera work. But somehow, regardless of her Moscow ‘s “it” woman looks Vera does not represent any kind of threat. Her androgynous looks with a short haircut are reminiscent of the “tovarisch” sexless female characters of Stalinist cinema. These type of women,

according to Clark and Kaganovsky, are there to prevent homosexual panic, but yet to secure the trusting intimate relationship between men.

In the examples of homosexual panic analyzed by Sedgwick, we see a mechanism at work that prevents the homosocial from transgressing into the homosexual. The standard love triangle keeps same-sex desire always mediated through heterosexual longing. Socialist realist narratives, while relying on a similar structure, perform the opposite task. According to Kaganovsky, in socialist realist texts, homosexual panic is often turned into heterosexual desire (Kaganovsky 64).

As I said, although the film, considered to be celebrating the sexual freedoms in a newly liberated and commercialized Russia, has an uncomfortable balance between being provocative, ironic and fun and a fearful look back to the masochistic longing for the old Stalinist/ Socialist order - and as a result presents an unconscious (I am prone to think) a double-layered grotesque self-irony. Although the ideological apparatus here is the head quarters of Timofei's workplace of producing commercials and ad campaigns promoting different forms of consumerism, it still carries the residue of the ideology of the Soviet past. The new capitalist world order in a similar manner shapes the new citizen of Moscow/new Russia: what and whom should one love and worship, how one should look and what kind of motto and slogans one should articulate and follow.²

² Тут, можно сказать, пародийно обыгрывается один из основных постулатов постмодернизма относительно того, что в современной действительности и искусстве человек уже не может просто и без затей произнести «Я люблю тебя», не добавив какой-либо аналогии или сравнения. Да и в других эпизодах герои в большей степени изъясняются как бы при помощи песен в исполнении Кола Бельды, Жанны Агузаровой и Земфиры, что кажется вполне естественным, а вот их собственные слова и поступки почему-то выглядят фальшивыми и придуманными. Вторая, иллюзорная реальность представляется натуральнее первой — той, что должна быть настоящей.

For example, the TV commercials of Coca-Cola, which Timofei creates, feature a line of soldiers, with the Red Square in the background, chanting: «Свобода- это Кола!»- “Freedom is Cola!” «Любовь- это кола !» The stylistics of this commercial is reminiscent of the Soviet times TV programming starting with the following imperative sentences “serve to Soviet Union!” “Love Stalin, love your motherland.”

In sum, Stolpovskaia’s film, although considered to be scandalous due to its attempt of giving way to queer cinema in Russia, instead of deconstructing gender and social types-stereotypes, it reinforces them. Even the “gay” union between Timofei and Uloomji appears to be forced, and is simply staged in imitation of “tovarischestvo” male bonding, in accordance with aesthetics and social expectations of Stalinist culture. This film, also, like many other socialist realist texts, delivers the message about the discipline. The always unruly male subject must be brought in line with the requirements of Stalinist patriarchy for docile and disciplined subjects. And Vera is being forgiven in the end when she gives birth to their communal child and has a softer feminine look, with longer hair, less harsh make-up.

В мире смещённых ценностей, изменившихся вкусов и подменённых склонностей, где травестия в широком смысле слова как всеобщая смена имиджей, трансвестизм в более узком понимании и гомоэротическая ориентация стали модными и распространёнными явлениями, прежде всего — в столичных кругах, то и игра в любовь и секс — это чуть ли не главный мотив праздного существования
(Kudriavtsev <http://www.kinopoisk.ru/review/960013/>)

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